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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined the ways in which school principals, directors of nursing education programs, and supervisors of community health centers manage conflict are presented in this paper. The study attempted to determine the applicability of research on conflict management in noneducational settings to school organizations. Interviews were conducted with 15 Canadian school principals, 18 New Zealand school principals, 8 community health supervisors in western Canada, and 6 directors of schools of nursing in a western Canadian province. Findings indicate that both groups of principals and the community health center supervisors most often handled conflict by managing the common information base, and that nursing education directors attempted to manage the organizational climate. A conclusion is that conflict resolution information developed from the study of certain organizational settings is not necessarily applicable to others. Five tables are included. (29 references) (LMI)

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Executive Summary

TYPES OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES USED IN THREE KINDS OF ORGANIZATIONS: 50 CASES FROM SCHOOLS, COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRES, AND SCHOOLS OF NURSING

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Executive Summary

TYPES OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES USED IN THREE KINDS OF ORGANIZATIONS: 50 CASES FROM SCHOOLS, COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRES, AND SCHOOLS OF NURSING

Conflicts have long been seen as important challenges in human affairs. In the literature on organizations their potential for both negative and positive effects is acknowledged frequently. Furthermore, conflict management is clearly linked with organizational effectiveness (e.g., Wynn & Guditus, 1984; Sergiovanni, 1987; Leithwood, Cousins, & Smith, 1990; Owens, 1987).

PROBLEM

However, conceptualizations about conflict and its management derive mainly from studies conducted in such settings as private-sector collective bargaining and national and international politics. Yet, those conceptualizations are frequently applied in quite different arenas -- with little evidence of concern about the transferability issue. For example, Owens (1987), in a widely used text on educational administration, devotes a full chapter to the management of conflict in school systems; but he relies on references that are almost exclusively non-educational.

The assumption that knowledge developed in certain kinds of organizations is applicable in other organizations is a matter of concern. A primary reason is that findings from recent school studies are inconsistent with findings from non-educational settings.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Conflict management in schools

A review of the educational administration literature shows that there are relatively few studies on conflict management in educational settings and that quite often the findings are inconsistent. For example:

- Loewen (1983) found that the conflict management tactics used by school superintendents could not be categorized adequately if one relied on the typologies found in the literature. Four types of conflict management tactics he encountered in his study were not acknowledged in the

literature -- buying time, coalition destruction, environment control, and displaying naivety. One type found in the literature (appearing to lose) was not encountered in his study.

- In her study of how teachers deal with conflicts, Boyd (1989) identified eight stages in the development of conflicts -- but those stages do not match those found in the literature.
- Abdennur (1987) found that social service volunteers tended to avoid conflict rather than confront or seek reconciliation. In contrast, Loewen found that his school superintendents were quite aggressive when dealing with conflict, and Boyd (1989) discovered that teachers tend to seek reconciliation.
- Eiserman's (1991) review of five studies revealed inconsistencies and contradictions in information about the conflict management strategies used by school administrators: "Fris (in press) and Zeigler, Kehoe, and Reisman (1985) found collaborative problem solving to be the preferred strategy. Loewen's (1983) participants used win-lose tactics. Content (1986) identified compromising as a preferred technique. Wirt and Christovich (1989) discovered that management styles varied according to the circumstances surrounding the conflict."

Conflict management in tertiary education

Ambiguities and anomalies are apparent also in the literature on conflict management in post-secondary institutions:

- Hobbs (1974) focused on the management of academic disputes and found that they were muted or avoided whenever possible.
- Weisbord, Lawrence, and Charns (1978), in their study of academic medical centers, identified bargaining and smoothing over (diffusion) as the preferred methods of conflict management.
- Neff (1986) examined the conflict management styles of administrators in 12 universities and found that the conflict management techniques used by her academic administrators differed significantly from the styles used by managers in business or industry. She found also that female and male administrators in academia use different styles when dealing with conflicts -- women use compromising as a conflict management technique significantly more often than men.
- More ambiguity is occasioned by the findings of Woodtli (1987) and Valentine (1988). Amongst their findings is an indication that post-secondary administrators' choice of particular strategies for dealing with conflict may be related to the type of conflict -- but the data leave the precise nature of the relationship unclear.

Conflict management in health care organizations

In studies of how health workers deal with conflicts, the strategies identified correspond closely to those identified elsewhere in the literature. For example, heavy reliance on the collaborative approach to dealing with conflicts has been noted frequently (e.g., Redland, 1983; Wolcott, 1983; Okolo, 1985; Saulo, 1987; Veninga, 1987; Jones, Buschardt & Cadenhead, 1990; and Evans, 1991). Redland found that interactions were either collaborative (55%) or accommodative (35%) -- not competitive. Similarly, Evans (1991) concluded that nurses are adept at negotiating ("getting what you want from others while helping others get what they want") and resolving conflict through compromise or consensus strategies. In similar vein, Mason, Costello-Nickitas, Scanlan, & Magnuson (1990) noted that many women are not comfortable with power grabbing, but are more comfortable with power sharing. And Growe (1991, p. 142), in a discussion of Alberta nurses' union activities, notes that "The lesson [of the 1980 Alberta nurses' strike] is that defiance beats conciliation as a strategy by a mile." One implication is that nurses in Alberta had been conciliatory rather than assertive or confrontational. Finally, Demo (1986) found that nurses felt they needed to use tact and diplomacy and show respect for a doctor's authority. In general, then, these authors paint pictures of health workers in which accommodativeness figures large. Confrontational and competitive approaches to conflict management have been observed too (e.g., Okolo, 1985; Saulo, 1987; Jones et al, 1990; Mason et al, 1990; Evans, 1991; and Growe, 1991).

However, other writers have noted techniques for managing conflict that have not been observed widely:

- Gibson (1986) found that clinicians and administrators in health care organizations engaged in projection and hostile blaming. Clinicians described their administrators as "concretist, anally retentive, lacking in concern for patients, and rigid"; administrators described clinicians as "idealistic, grandiose, supercilious, and unrelated to the real world". Of course, this may be evidence of the denigration technique or the avoidance strategy. And avoidance has been identified as a frequently used strategy by Redland (1983), Okolo (1985), Jones et al (1990), and Evans (1991).
- In a study of hospital administrators, nurses, and physicians, Noble and Rancourt (1991) used a three-fold model to categorize behaviors exhibited during conflicts: (1)the empirical mode (E) -- use of senses and inductive reasoning; (2) the noetic mode (N) -- use of intuitive feelings and abductive reasoning; and (3) the rational mode (R) -- use of defined standards or rules and deductive reasoning. It was found that administrators and physicians

preferred the rational over the empirical over the noetic (REN), while nurses preferred the empirical over the rational over the noetic (ERN).

Conclusion

Inconsistencies such as these suggests a need for research to validate (and extend) information about the management of conflicts in different kinds of organizations.

OBJECTIVES

Three parallel investigations now underway were designed to develop a substantial set of data concerning how school principals, directors of schools of nursing, and supervisors of community health clinics manage conflicts -- and thereby to test the robustness of existing conceptualizations of conflict management. More specifically, the investigations was designed to (1) provide rich descriptions of important incidents in the subjects' experiences with conflict, (2) identify patterns in those experiences, and (3) relate the findings to existing theory.

The purpose of this report is to present findings that respond to the question, "How do school principals, directors of nursing education programs, and supervisors of community health centres deal with conflicts?" and to relate those findings to pertinent research and theory.

METHOD

In these investigations the subjects were asked to describe a work-related conflict that was "somewhat challenging" -- i.e., non-routine. The interviews were structured loosely around six foci: causes, strategies used, contingent circumstances, effects, helpful skills and structures, and conclusions, beliefs, and recommendations about conflict management. The interviews were recorded on audio tapes, transcribed to computer disks, and then subjected to content analyses that centre on the six foci identified above. Finally the individual analyses are examined for cross-case consistencies.

Here, only the findings pertaining to strategies used to deal with conflicts are reported.

DATA SOURCES

The data came from interviews with four sets of informants:

1) 15 school principals in a large urban school system in Western Canada;
2) 18 school principals in a large city in New Zealand;
3) 8 supervisors of community health clinics in a large city in Western Canada; and
4) 6 directors of schools of nursing in a Western Canada province.

The informants described 50 conflicts.

FINDINGS

Strategies used by Canadian school principals

The transcripts of the interviews with Canadian school principals contained 146 discrete statements about actions that were taken to deal with the conflicts. When those actions were classified without reference to any *a priori* typology of conflict management, they appeared to fall into 12 categories (Table 1.1).

The principals most often attempted to deal with conflicts by *managing the common information base* -- working on the information which they and others used. This frequently involved attempts to influence others' understandings. The second most frequent class of responses to conflict was *censuring unacceptable behavior* had the general objective of re-establishing orderly, functional interpersonal relationships. The third most common class of response was *managing climate*. This category includes actions designed to provide moral support, maximize rationality, and build (or salvage) others' self-esteem.

Strategies used by New Zealand school principals

The New Zealand interviews contained 188 references to specific management tactics. When those actions were categorized, again without reference to any *a priori* model, nine primary classes emerged (Table 1.2). The types of strategies referenced most frequently included three that emerged in the Canadian data (see above): managing information, being assertive ("confronting" in the Canadian data), and managing climate. Two other types of strategies that occurred frequently were cultivating allies and maintaining order. *Cultivating allies* includes forming coalitions (a type also evident in the Canadian data) and co-opting. *Maintaining order* includes actions that ensure accepted standards of "proper" conduct are followed; they were associated with events that ranged from infractions of regulations to outbursts of anger and physical violence.

General typology of conflict management strategies used by school principals

A synthesis of the data for Canadian and New Zealand principals produced the general typology presented in Table 1.3.

Strategies used by directors of nursing education

The interviews with directors of nursing education contained 152 references to actions for dealing with the conflicts described. They were of six types (Table 2.1). The types used most frequently were *manage climate*, *exercise control*, and *manage information*.

Strategies used by supervisors of community health centres

The supervisors of community health centres reported 173 actions for dealing with the conflicts they described. Preliminary analyses suggest that these actions are of 10 types (Table 3.1). The most common class is *manage information*. At the next level of frequency are classes 2-6: *tackling the issue*, *demonstrating affect and empathy*, *anticipating*, and *pausing and pondering*.

INTERIM CONCLUSIONS

The literature about conflict management frequently reflects an untested assumption that information developed in certain kinds of organizations is applicable in other kinds of organizations. The data from the three investigations of how conflicts are management in schools, health clinics, and schools of nursing indicate that the assumption is not entirely warranted. Some of the strategies described in the literature were not reported by the informants, some strategies reported by the informants are not evident in the literature. Also, the three kinds of administrators apparently differed in their general approaches to conflict management; they relied on different combinations of actions.

These data may be useful in differentiating professional development programs.

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Table 1.1

Typology of Conflict Management Strategies Used by Canadian Principals

Primary class Sub-category	Number of principals
1. Manage the information base (46 references)	
a. Influence others' understandings of the situation	8
b. Gather information	5
c. Validate information	4
d. Impede the flow of information	4
e. Critique information	3
f. Try to change others' beliefs, actions	3
2. Censure unacceptable behavior (26 references)	
a. Lay down the law	9
b. Contradict	4
c. Put people in their places	3
3. Manage climate (21 references)	
a. Provide moral support for others	8
b. Controlling the emotional pitch	3
c. Communicate particular values, model behavior	2
d. Acknowledge importance of others' personal growth	2
e. Provide opportunity for saving face	1
4. Use coalitions (13 references)	8
5. Safeguard personal interests (8 references)	3
6. Focus attention on the real problem (6 references)	4
7. Shift responsibility for managing the conflict to whom it belongs (6 references)	4
8. Get rid of the problem people (5 references)	5
9. Provide resources (5 references)	
a. Time	2
b. Specialist help	2
10. Make concessions, accede (5 references)	4
11. Buy time (3 references)	3
12. Restrain, constrain (2 references)	2

Table 1.2

Conflict Management Strategies Used by NZ Principals

Primary class Sub-class	Number of Instances	Number of Principals
1. Manage information	**71**	
Provide, share information	27	13
Gather information	20	9
Analyze information	10	8
Dispute, confront	5	5
Provide counsel, advice	6	3
Restrict the flow of information	2	2
Distort information	1	1
2. Cultivate allies	**28**	**13**
3. Be assertive	**25**	
Resist, insist	12	4
Use threats, force	9	6
Bluff, call a bluff	2	2
Put people in their places	2	1
4. Manage climate	**20**	
Be supportive of others	10	6
Mollify, build goodwill	9	4
Set the tone	1	1
5. Maintain order	**20**	**8**
6. Concede or accede	**7**	**4**
7. Cover your butt	**7**	**3**
8. Buy time	**5**	**4**
9. Separate the conflictants	**5**	**4**

Table 1.3

General Typology of Conflict Management Strategies Used by School Principals

1. **Managing information**

   Actions that enrich and strengthen the data used by conflictants, as well as actions that restrict the flow of information.

2. **Managing coalitions**

   Actions that develop support groups.

3. **Managing climate**

   Actions that (a) preserve order, by invoking norms, rewards/punishments, accepted standards of behavior, established ways of doing things; (b) maintain an atmosphere that is conducive to problem solving, by building rapport, being supportive, smoothing emotions, advocating specific values, and so on.

4. **Being assertive**

   Resorting to power, persistence, courage, and/or bluff.

5. **Protecting personal interests**

   Taking actions that ensure opponents can be "nailed" unequivocally, or must share responsibility for any unpleasant turn of events.

6. **Re-arranging the "stage"**

   Acts that manipulate the physical, organizational, and/or social environment to suit one's purposes.

7. **Using time strategically**

   Influencing the timing of events, most often to let things simmer down (or come to the boil), to marshal resources.

8. **Avoid**

   Sidestepping, making concessions, giving up.

Table 2.1

Types of Conflict Management Strategies Used By Directors of Nursing Education

PRIMARY TYPE Sub-type	Incidence
EXERCISE CONTROL	
Assist with remediation	2
Build case against a person	9
Bypass obstruction	3
Communicate parameters	3
Enforce parameters	12
Provide close supervision	1
Remove a problem person	2
Warn/confront a person regarding a problem	8
FOSTER COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING	
Initiate/encourage discussion	4
Mediate disputes	1
Manage negotiations	5
Redirect responsibility for solving a problem	2
Restructure decision making framework	1
Seek advice/help of others	2
MANAGE AFFECT	
Encourage catharsis/ventilating	5
MANAGE CLIMATE	
Ascertain others' concerns	6
Assist others to achieve personal goals	6
Assist others to solve problems	12
Be principled (endorse ethical/moral principles)	3
Establish helpful structures/routines	3
Establish parameters	18
Model desirable behavior	1
Provide moral support	3
MANAGE INFORMATION	
Foster exchanges of information	6
Gather, receive information	7
Provide clarification	2
Provide counseling	5
Share information	11
Use experts	3
Verify information	3
SEEK SUPPORT	
Cultivate allies	2
Form coalitions	1

Table 3.1

Types of Conflict Management Strategies Used By Community Health Centre Nursing Supervisors

PRIMARY TYPE Sub-type	Incidence
1. Manage knowledge a. Acquisition b. Dissemination	48
2. Tackle the issues	22
3. Demonstrate affect and empathy	18
4. Anticipate	18
5. Pause and ponder	16
6. Control	17
7. Defuse the situation	10
8. Use logical consequences a. Maintain neutrality b. Let the chips fall where they may c. Give people rope	7
9. Nurture coalitions and collaboration	12
10. Dodge	5